

CHAUCER AND HIS TIMES.

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WE consider the age of Chaucer as the true starting-point of the English literature properly so called. In Italy letters appear to have revived after the long and gloomy period characterized by the somewhat false term of "the dark ages," with astonishing rapidity. Like germs and seeds of plants which have lain for centuries buried deep in the unfruitful bowels of the earth, and suddenly brought up by some convulsion of nature to the surface, the intellect of Italy burst forth, in the fourteenth century, into a tropical luxuriance, putting out its fairest flowers of poetry, and its solidest and most beautiful fruits of wisdom and of wit. Dante died seven years before, and Petrarch and Boccaccio about fifty years after, the birth of Chaucer, who thus was exposed to the strongest and directest influence of the genius of these great men. How great that influence was, we shall presently see. The great causes, then, which modified and directed the genius of Chaucer were—first, the new Italian poetry, which then suddenly burst forth upon the world, like Pallas from the brain of Jupiter, perfect and consummate in its virgin strength and beauty; second, the now decaying Roman or Provençal poetry; and third, the doctrines of the Reformation, which were beginning, obscurely but irresistibly, to agitate the minds of men; a movement which took its origin, as do all great and permanent revolutions, in the lower depths of the popular heart, heaving gradually onward, like the tremendous ground-swell of the equator, until it burst with resistless strength upon the Romish Church in Germany and in England, sweeping all before it. Wickliffe, who was born in 1324, only four years before Chaucer, had undoubtedly communicated to the poet many of his bold doctrines: the father of our poetry and the father of our reformed religion were both attached to the party of the celebrated John of Gaunt, and were both honored with the friendship and protection of that powerful prince: Chaucer, indeed, was the kinsman of the earl, having married the sister of Catherine Swinford, first the mistress and ultimately the wife of "time-honored Lancaster;" and the poet's varied and uncertain career seems to have faithfully followed all the vicissitudes of John of Gaunt's eventful life.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born, as he informs us himself, in London; and for the date of an event so important to the destinies of English letters, we must fix it, on the authority of the inscription upon his tomb, as having happened in the year 1328; that is to say, at the commencement of the splendid and chivalrous reign of Edward III. The honor of having been the place of his education has been eagerly disputed by the two great and ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge; the former, however, of the

two learned sisters having apparently the best established right to the maternity—or at least the fosterage—of so illustrious a nursling. Cambridge founds her claim upon the circumstance of Chaucer's having subscribed one of his early works "*Philogenet of Cambridge, clerk.*" He afterward returned to London, and there became a student of the law. His detestation of the monks appears, from a very curious document, to have begun even so early as his abode in the grave walls of the Temple; for we find the name of Jeffrey Chaucer inscribed in an ancient register as having been fined for the misdemeanor of beating a friar in Fleet street.

The first efforts of a revival of letters will always be made in the path of translation; and to this principle Chaucer forms no exception. He was an indefatigable translator; and the whole of many—nay, a great part of *all*—his works bears unequivocal traces of the prevailing taste for imitation. How much he has improved upon his models, what new lights he has placed them in, with what skill he has infused fresh life into the dry bones of obscure authors, it will hereafter be our business to inquire. He was the poetical pupil of Gower, and, like Raphael and Shakspeare, he surpassed his master: Gower always speaks with respect of his illustrious pupil in the art of poetry; and, in his work entitled "*Confessio Amantis*," places in the mouth of Venus the following elegant compliment;—

And grete wel Chaucer, when ye mete,
As my disciple and my poete:
For in the flowers of his youth,
In sundry wise, as he well couthe,
Of dities and of songes glado
The which he for my sake made, etc.

These lines also prove that Chaucer began *early* to write; and probably our poet continued during the whole course of his eventful life, to labor assiduously in the fields of letters.

His earliest works were strongly tinctured with the manner, nay, even with the mannerism, of the age. They are much fuller of allegory than his later productions; they are distinguished by a greater parade of scholarship, and by a deeper tinge of that amorous and metaphysical mysticism which pervades the later Provençal poetry, and which reached its highest pitch of fantastical absurdity in the *Arrêts d'Amour* of Picardy and Languedoc. As an example of this we may cite his "*Dream*," an allegorical composition written to celebrate the nuptials of his friend and patron John of Gaunt, with Blanche, the heiress of Lancaster.

Chaucer was in every sense a man of the world: he was the ornament of two of the most brilliant courts in the annals of England—those of Edward III. and his successor Richard II. He also accompanied

the former king in his expedition into France, and was taken prisoner about 1359, at the siege of Retters; and in 1367 we find him receiving from the crown a grant of 20 marks, *i. e.* about 200*l.* of our present money.

Our poet, thus distinguished as a soldier, as a courtier, and as a scholar, was honored with the duty of forming part of an embassy to the splendid court of Genoa, where he was present at the nuptials of Violante, daughter of Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, with the Duke of Clarence. At this period he made the acquaintance of Petrarch, and probably of Boccaccio also: to the former of these illustrious men he certainly was personally known; for he hints, in his "Canterbury Tales," his having learned from him the beautiful and pathetic tale of the patient Griselda:—

Learned at Padua of a worthy clerke
Francis Petrarche, the laureate poet:
Highto thys clerke, whose rhetorique sweet
Enlumined al itale of poesy.

It was during his peregrinations in France and Italy that Chaucer drew at the fountain-head those deep draughts from the Hippocrene of Tuscany and of Provence which flow and sparkle in all his compositions. It is certain that he introduced into the English language an immense quantity of words absolutely and purely French, and that he succeeded with an admirable dexterity in harmonizing the ruder sounds of his vernacular tongue; so successfully, indeed, that it may be safely asserted that very few poets in any modern language are more exquisitely and uniformly musical than Chaucer. Indeed, he has been accused, and in rather severe terms, of having naturalized in English "a wagon-load of foreign words."

In 1380 we find Chaucer appointed to the office of Clerk of the Works at Windsor, where he was charged with overlooking the repairs about to be made in St. George's Chapel, then in a ruinous condition.

In 1383 Wickliffe completed his translation into the English language of the Bible, and his death, in the following year, seems to have been the signal for the commencement of a new and gloomy phase in the fortunes of the poet. Chaucer returned to England in 1386, and, the party to which he belonged having lost its political influence, he was imprisoned in the Tower, and deprived of the places and privileges which had been granted to him. Two years afterward he was permitted to sell his patents, and in 1389 he appears to have been induced to abandon, and even to accuse, his former associates, of whose treachery toward him he bitterly complains.

In reward for this submission to the government, we afterward find him restored to favor, and made, in the year 1389, Clerk of the Works at Westminster. It is at this period that he is supposed to have retired to pass the calm evening of his active life in the green shades of Woodstock, where he is related to have composed his admirable "Canterbury Tales." This production, though, according to many opinions, neither the finest nor even the most characteristic of

Chaucer's numerous and splendid poems, is yet the one of them all by which he is now best known: it is the work which has handed his name down to future generations as the earliest glory of his country's literature; and as such it warrants us in appealing, from the perhaps partial judgments of isolated critics, to the sovereign tribunal of posterity. The decisions of contemporaries may be swayed by fashion and prejudice; the criticism of scholars may be tinged with partiality; but the unanimous voice of four hundred and fifty years is sure to be a true index of the relative value of a work of genius.

Beautiful as are many of his other productions, it is the "Canterbury Tales" which have enshrined Chaucer in the penetralia of England's Glory Temple; it is to the wit, the pathos, the humanity, the chivalry of those tales that our minds recur when our ear is struck with the venerable name of Chaucer. In 1390 we find the poet receiving the honorable charge of Clerk of the Works at Windsor; and, two years later, a grant from the crown of 20*l.* and a tun of wine annually. Toward the end of the century which his illustrious name had adorned, he appears to have fallen into some distress; for another document is in existence securing to the poet the protection of the crown (probably against importunate creditors;) and in 1399 we find the poet's name inserted in the lease of a house holden from the Abbot and Chapter of Westminster, and occupying the spot upon which was afterward erected Henry VII.'s chapel, now forming one of the most brilliant ornaments of Westminster Abbey. In this house, as is with great probability conjectured, Chaucer died, on the 25th of October, 1400, and was buried in the Abbey, being the first of that long array of mighty poets whose bones repose with generations of kings, warriors, and statesmen, beneath the "long-drawn aisles."

In reading the works of this poet the qualities which cannot fail to strike us most are—admirable truth, freshness, and *livingness* of his descriptions of external nature; profound knowledge of human life in the delineation of character; and that all-embracing humanity of heart which makes him, as it makes the reader, sympathise with all God's creation, taking away from his humor every taste of bitterness and sarcasm. This humor, colored by and springing from universal sympathy, this noblest humanity—we mean humanity in the sense of Terence's: "*homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto*"—is the heritage of only the greatest among mankind; and is but an example of that deep truth which Nature herself has taught us, when she placed in the human heart the spring of Laughter fast by the fountain of Tears.

We shall now proceed to examine the principal poems of Chaucer, in the hope of presenting to our readers some scale or measure of the gradual development of those powers which appear, at least to us, to have reached their highest apogee or exaltation in the "Canterbury Tales."

In the first work to which we shall turn our attention, Chaucer has given us a translation of a poem

esteemed by all French critics the noblest monument of their poetical literature anterior to the time of Francis I. This is the "Romaunt of the Rose," a beautiful mixture of allegory and narrative, of which we shall presently give an outline in the words of Warton. The "Roman de la Rose" was commenced by William de Lorris, who died in 1260, and completed, in 1310, by Jean de Meun, a witty and satirical versifier, who was one of the ornaments of the brilliant court of Charles le Bel. Chaucer has translated the whole of the portion composed by the former, together with some of Meun's continuation; making, as he goes on, innumerable improvements in the text, which, where it harmonizes with his own conceptions, he renders with singular fidelity. "The difficulties and dangers of a lover, in pursuing and obtaining the object of his desires, are the literal argument of the poem. This design is couched under the allegory of a rose, which our lover, after frequent obstacles, gathers in a delicious garden. He traverses vast ditches, scales lofty walls, and forces the gates of adamantine castles. These enchanted holds are all inhabited by various divinities; some of which assist, and some oppose, the lover's progress." The English poem is written, like the French original, in the short rhymed octo-syllabic couplets so universally adopted by the Trouvères, a measure well fitted, from its ease and flowingness, for the purpose of long narratives. We have said that the translation is in most cases very close; Chaucer was so far from desiring to make his works pass for original when they had no claim to this qualification, that he even specifies, with great care and with even a kind of exultation, the sources from whence his productions are derived. Indeed, at such early periods in the literature of any country, writers seem to attach as great or greater dignity to the office of translator than to the more arduous duty of original composition; the reason of which probably is, that in the childhood of nations as well as of men, learning is a rarer, and therefore more admired, quality than imagination.

The allegorical personages in the "Romaunt of the Rose" are singularly varied, rich, and beautiful. Sorrow, Envy, Avarice, Hate, Beauty, Franchise, Richesse, are successively brought on the stage. As an example of the remarks we have just been making, we will quote a short passage from the latter part of Chaucer's translation, *i. e.* from that portion of the poem composed by John of Meun: it describes the attendants in the palace of Old Age: we will print the original French and also the extract:—

Travaile et douleur la hebergent,
Mais ils la lient et la chargent,
Que Mort prochaine luy presentent,
En talant de se repentir;
Tant luy sont de fieux sentir;
Adoncq luy vient en remembrance,
En cest tardive presence.
Quand il se voit foible et cheue.

With her, Labour and eke Travaile
Lodgid bene, with sorwe and wo.
That never out of her court go
Pain and Distress, Skenesse and Ire,
And Melancholie that angry sire,

Ben of her palais Senatours;
Goning and Grutching her herbegeors.
The day and night her to tourment,
With cruel death they her present,
And tellen her erliche and late,
That Deth standith armid at her gate.

Here Chaucer's improvements are plainly perceptible; the introduction of Death, standing *armed* at the gate, is a grand and sublime thought, of which no trace is to be found in the comparatively flat original; not to mention the terrible distinctness with which Chaucer enumerates Old Age's *Senators*, Pain, Distress, Sickness, Ire, and Melancholy; and her grim chamberlains, Groaning and Grudging.

The next poem which we shall mention is the love-story entitled "Troilus and Cresseide," founded on one of the most favorite legends of the Middle Ages, and which Shakspeare himself has dramatized in the tragedy of the same name. The anachronism of placing the scene of such a history of chivalric love in the heroic age of the Trojan War is, we think, more than compensated by the pathos, the nature, and the variety which characterize many of the ancient romances on this subject. Chaucer informs us that his authority is Lollius, a mysterious personage very often referred to by the writers of the Middle Ages, and so impossible to discover and identify that he must be considered as the Ignis Fatuus of antiquaries. "Of Lollius," says one of these unhappy and baffled investigators, "it will become every-one to speak with deference." The whole poem is saturated with the spirit not of the Ionian rhapsodist, but of the Provençal minstrel. It is written in the rhymed ten-syllabled couplet, which Chaucer has used in the greater part of his works. In the midst of a thousand anachronisms, of a thousand absurdities, this poem contains some strokes of pathos which are invariably to be found in every thing Chaucer wrote, and which show that his heart ever vibrated responsive to the touch of nature.

Though we propose, in a future volume, to give such specimens and extracts of Chaucer as may suffice to enable our readers to judge of his manner, we cannot abstain from citing here a most exquisite passage: it describes the bashfulness and hesitation of Cressida before she can find courage to make the avowal of her love:—

And as the newe-abashed nightingale
That stineth first, when she beginneth sing,
When that she heareth any herdis tale,
Or in the hedgis any wright stirring;
And after siker doth her voice outting;
Right so Cresseide, when that her drede stent,
Opened her herte and told him her entent.

We may remark here the extraordinary fondness for the song of birds exhibited by Chaucer in all his works. There is not one of the English poets, and certainly none of the poets of any other nation, who has shown a more intense enjoyment for this natural music: he seems to omit no opportunity of describing the "doulx ramaige" of these feathered poets, whose accents seem to be echoed in all their delicacy, their purity and fervor, in the fresh strains of "our Father Chaucer:—"

Sound of vernal showers
On the twinkling grass,
Rain-awakened flowers,
All that ever was

Joyous, and clear, and fresh, thy music doth surpass!

We have mentioned the anachronism of *plan* in this poem; it abounds in others no less extraordinary. Among these, he represents Cresseide as reading the *Thebaid* of Statius (a very favorite book of Chaucer,) which he calls "The Romance of Thebis;" and Pandarus endeavors to comfort Troilus with arguments of predestination taken from Bishop Bradwardine, a theologian nearly contemporary with the poet.

The "House of Fame," a magnificent allegory, glowing with all the "barbaric pearl and gold" of Gothic imagination, is the next work on which we shall remark. Its origin was probably Provençal, but the poem which Chaucer translated is now lost. We will condense the argument of this poem from Warton:—"The poet, in a vision, sees a temple of glass decorated with an unaccountable number of golden images. On the walls are engraved stories from Virgil's *Eneid* and Ovid's *Epistles*. Leaving this temple, he sees an eagle with golden wings soaring near the sun. The bird descends, seizes the poet in its talons, and conveys him to the Temple of Fame, which, like that of Ovid, is situated between earth and sea. He is left by the eagle near the house, which is built of materials bright as polished glass, and stands on a rock of ice. All the southern side of this rock is covered with engravings of the names of famous men, which are perpetually melting away by the heat of the sun. The northern side of the rock was alike covered with names; but, being shaded from the warmth of the sun, the characters here remained unmelted and uneffaced. Within the niches formed in the pinnacles stood all round the castle

All manere of minstrellis,
And gestours, that tellen tales
Both of weping and eke of game;

and the most renowned harpers—Orpheus, Arion, Chiron, and the Briton Glaskeirion. In the hall he meets an infinite multitude of heralds, on whose surcoats are embroidered the arms of the most re-doubted champions. At the upper end, on a lofty shrine of carbuncle, sits Fame. Her figure is like those of Virgil and Ovid. Above her, as if sustained on her shoulders, sate Alexander and Hercules. From the throne to the gates of the hall ran a range of pillars with respective inscriptions. On the first pillar, made of lead and iron, stood Josephus, the Jewish historian, with seven other writers on the same subject. On the second, made of iron, and painted with the blood of tigers, stood Statius. On another, higher than the rest, stood Homer, Dares Phrygius, Livy, Lollius, Guido of Colonna, and Geoffrey of Monmouth, writers on the Trojan story. On a pillar of 'tinnid iron clere' stood Virgil; and next him, on a pillar of copper, appeared Ovid. The figure of Lucan was placed upon a pillar of iron 'wrought full sternly,' accompanied by many Roman historians. On a pillar of sulphur stood Claudian.

The hall is filled by crowds of minor authors. In the meantime crowds of every nation and condition fill the temple, each presenting his claim to the queen. A messenger is sent to summon Eolus from his cave in Thrace, who is ordered to bring his two clarions, Slander and Praise, and his trumpeter Triton. The praises of each petitioner are then sounded, according to the partial or capricious appointment of Fame! and equal merits obtain very different success. The poet then enters the house or labyrinth of Rumor. It was built of willow twigs, like a cage, and therefore admitted every sound. From this house issue tidings of every kind, like fountains and rivers from the sea. Its inhabitants, who are eternally employed in hearing or telling news, raising reports, and spreading lies, are then humorously described: they are chiefly sailors, pilgrims, and pardoners. At length our author is awakened by seeing a venerable person of great authority; and thus the vision abruptly terminates." From the few lines we have quoted, it may be seen that this poem, like the "Romaunt of the Rose," is written in the octosyllabic measure. Though full of extravagances, exaggerations of the already too monstrous personifications of Ovid, this work extorts our admiration by the inexhaustible richness and splendor of its ornaments; a richness as perfectly in accordance with Middle Age art, as it is extravagant and puerile in the tinsel pages of the Roman poet. That multiplicity of parts and profusion of minute embellishment which forms the essential characteristic of a Gothic cathedral is displaced and barbarous when introduced into the severer outlines of a Grecian temple or a Roman amphitheatre.

It now becomes our delightful duty to speak of the "Canterbury Tales;" and we can hardly trust ourselves to confine within reasonable limits the examination of this admirable work, containing in itself, as it does, merits of the most various and opposite kinds. It is a finished picture, delineating almost every variety of human character, crowded with figures, whose lineaments no lapse of time, no change of manners, can render faint or indistinct, and which will retain, to the latest centuries, every stroke of outline and every tint of color, as sharp and as vivid as when they came from the master's hand. The Pilgrims of Chaucer have traversed four hundred and fifty years—like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness—arid periods of neglect and ignorance, sandy flats of formal mannerism, unfertilized by any spring of beauty, and yet "their garments have not decayed, neither have their shoes waxed old."

Besides the lively and faithful delineation—*i. e. descriptive* delineation of these personages, nothing can be more dramatic than the way in which they are set in motion, speaking and acting in a manner always conformable to their supposed characters, and mutually heightening and contrasting each other's peculiarities. Further yet, besides these triumphs in the *framing* of his Tales, the Tales themselves, distributed among the various pilgrims of his troop, are, in almost every case, master-pieces of splendor, of pathos, or of drollery.

Chaucer, in the Prologue to the "Canterbury Tales," relates that he was about to pass the night at the "Tabarde" inn in Southwark, previous to setting out on a pilgrimage to the far-famed shrine of St. Thomas of Kent—i. e. Thomas à Becket—at Canterbury. On the evening preceding the poet's departure there arrive at the hostelry—

Wel nine and twenty in a compaigne
Of sondry folk, by aventure y-falle
In felawship, and pilgrimes wer they alle,
That toward Canterbury wolden ride.

The poet, glad of the opportunity of traveling in such good company, makes acquaintance with them all, and the party, after mutually promising to start early in the morning, sup and retire to rest.

Chaucer then gives a full and minute description, yet in incredibly few words, of the condition, appearance, manners, dress, and horses of the pilgrims. He first depicts a Knight, "brave in battle, and wise in council," courteous, grave, religious, experienced; who had fought for the faith in far lands, at Algesiras, at Alexandria, in Russia; a model of the chivalrous virtues:

And though that he was worthy, he was wise,
And of his port meke as is a mayde.
He was a veray parfit gentle knight.

He is mounted on a good, though not showy, horse, and clothed in a simple *gipon* or close tunic, of serviceable materials, characteristically stained and discolored by the friction of his armor.

This valiant and modest gentleman is accompanied by his son, a perfect specimen of the *damoyseau* or "bachelor" of this, or of the graceful and gallant youth of noble blood in any period. Chaucer seems to revel in the painting of his curled and shining locks—"as they were laid in presse"—of his tall and active person, of his already-shown bravery, of his "love-longing," of his youthful accomplishments, and of his gay and fantastic dress. His talent for music, his short, embroidered gown with long wide sleeves (the fashion of the day,) his perfect horsemanship, his skill in song-making, in illuminating and writing, his hopeful and yet somewhat melancholy love for his "lady"—

So hote he loved, that by nightertale
He slept no more than doth the nightingale—

nothing is omitted; not a stroke too few or too many.

This attractive pair are attended by a Yeman or retainer. This figure is a perfect portrait of one of those bold and sturdy archers, the type of the ancient national character; a type which still exists in the plain, independent peasantry of the rural districts of the land. He is clad in the picturesque costume of the greenwood, with his sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keen, stuck in his belt, and bearing in his hand "a mighty bowe"—the far-famed "long-bow" of the English archers—the most formidable weapon of the Middle Ages, which twanged such fatal music to the chivalry of France at Poitiers and Agincourt. His "not-hed," his "brown visage," tanned by sun and wind, his sword and buckler, his sharp and well-equipped dagger, the silver medal of St. Christopher

on his breast, the horn in the green baldric—how life-like does he stand before us!

These three figures are admirably contrasted with a Prioress, a lady of noble birth and delicate bearing, full of the pretty affectations, the dainty tendernesses of the "grande dame religieuse." Her name is "Madame Eglantine;" and the mixture, in her manners and costume, of gentle worldly vanities and of ignorance of the world; her gayety, and the ever-visible difficulty she feels to put on an air of courtly hauteur; the lady-like delicacy of her manners at table, and her fondness for petting lap-dogs—

Of smale houndes had she, that sho fed
With rosted flesh, and milk, and wastel-bread,
But sore she wept if on of hem were dead,
Or if men smote it with a yerde smert,
For al was conscience, and tender herte,—

this masterly outline is most appropriately *framed* (if we may so speak) in the external and material accompaniments—the beads of "smale corall" hanging on her arm, and, above all, the golden brooch with its delicate device of a "crowned A," and the inscription *Amor vincit omnia*. She is attended by an inferior nun and three priests.

The Monk follows next, and he, like all the ecclesiastics, with the single exception of the Personore or secular parish priest, is described with strong touches of ridicule; but it is impossible not to perceive the strong and ever-present *humanity* of which we have spoken as perhaps the most marked characteristic of Chaucer's mind. The Monk is a gallant, richly-dressed, and pleasure-loving sportsman, caring not a straw for the obsolete strictness of the musty rule of his order. His sleeves are edged with rich fur, his hood fastened under his chin with a gold pin headed with a "love-knot," his eyes are buried deep in his fleshy, rosy cheeks, indicating great love of rich fare and potent wines; and yet the impression left on the mind by this type of fat, roystering sensuality is rather one of drollery and good-fellowship than of contempt or abhorrence.

Chaucer exhibits rich specimens of the various *genera* of that vast species "Monachus monachans," as it may be classed by some Rabelæian Theophrastus. The next personage who enters is the Frere, or mendicant friar, whose easiness of confession, wonderful skill in extracting money and gifts, and gay discourse, are most humorously and graphically described. He is represented as always carrying store of knives, pins, and toys, to give to his female penitents, as better acquainted with the tavern than with the lazar-house or the hospital, daintily dressed, and "lisping somewhat" in his speech, "to make his English swete upon the tongue."

This "worthy Limitour" is succeeded by a grave and formal personage, the Merchant: solemn and wise is he, with forked beard and pompous demeanor, speaking much of profit, and strongly in favor of the king's right to the subsidy "pour la saufergarde et custodie del mer," as the old Norman legist phrases it. He is dressed in motley, mounted on a tall and quiet horse, and wears a "Flaundrish beaver hat."

The learned poverty of the Clerke of Oxenforde forms a striking contrast to the Merchant's rather

pompous "respectability." He and his horse are "leane as is a rake" with abstinence, his clothes are threadbare, and he devotes to the purchase of his beloved books all the gold which he can collect from his friends and patrons, devoutly praying, as in duty bound, for the souls of those

Who yeve him wherewith to scolaie.

Nothing can be more true to nature than the mixture of pedantry and bashfulness in the manners of this anchorite of learning, and the tone of sententious morality and formal politeness which marks his language.

We now come to a "Serjeant of the Lawe," a wise and learned magistrate, rich and yet irreproachable, with all the statutes at his fingers' ends, a very busy man in reality, "but yet," not to forget the inimitable touch of nature in Chaucer, "*he seemed besier than he was.*" He is plainly dressed, as one who cares not to display his importance in his exterior.

Nor are preceding characters superior, in vividness and variety, to the figure of the "Frankleyn," or rich country-gentleman, who is next introduced: his splendid and hospitable profusion, and the epicurean luxuriousness of the man himself, are inimitably set before us. "It *snewed in his house* of mete and drink."

Then come a number of burgesses, whose appearance is classed under one general description. These are a Haberdasher, Carpenter, Webbe (or Weaver), Dyer, and Tapiser—

—Alle yclothed of o liveré,
Of a solempne and gret fraternité,—

that is, they all belong to one of those societies, or *mestiers*, which play so great a part in the municipal history of the Middle Ages. The somewhat *cosse* richness of their equipment, their knives hafted with silver, their grave and citizen-like bearing—all is in harmony with the pride and vanity, hinted at by the poet, of their wives, who think "it is full fayre to be ycleped *Madame.*"

The skill and critical discernment of the Cook are next described: "Well could he know a draught of London ale," and elaborately could he season the rich and fantastic dishes which composed the "carte" of the fourteenth century. He joins the pilgrimage in hope that his devotion may cure him of a disease in the leg.

A turbulent and boisterous Shipman appears next, who is described with minute detail. His brown complexion, his rude and quarrelsome manners, his tricks of trade, stealing wine "from Burdeux ward, while that the chapman slepe," all is enumerated; nor does the poet forget the seaman's knowledge of all the havens "from Gothland to the Cape de Finistère," nor his experience in his profession: "In many a tempest had his berd be shake."

He is followed by a Doctour of Phisike, a great astronomer and natural magician, deeply versed in the ponderous tomes of Hippocrates, Hali, Galen, Rhasis, Averrhoes, and the Arabian physicians. His diet is but small in quantity, but rich and nourishing;

"his study is but little on the Bible;" and he is humorously represented as particularly fond of gold, "*for gold in phisike is a cordiall.*"

Next to the grave, luxurious, and not quite orthodox doctor, enters the "Wife of Bath," a daguerreotypied specimen of the female *bourgeoise* of Chaucer's day; and bearing so perfectly the stamp and mark of her class, that, by changing her costume a little to the dress of the nineteenth century, she would serve as a perfect sample of her order even in the present day. She is equipped with a degree of solid costliness that does not exclude a little coquetry; her character is gay, bold, and not over rigid; and she is endeavoring, by long and frequent pilgrimages, to expiate some of the amorous errors of her youth. She is a substantial manufacturer of cloth, and so jealous of her precedency in the religious ceremonies of her parish, that, if any of her female acquaintance should venture to go before her on these solemn occasions, "so wroth was she, that she was out of alle charitee."

Contrasted with this rosy dame are two of the most beautiful and touching portraits ever delineated by the hand of genius—one "a pour Persoune," or secular parish priest; and his brother in simplicity, virtue, and evangelic purity, a Plowman. It is in these characters, and particularly in the "Tale" put into the mouth of the former, that we most distinctly see Chaucer's sympathy with the doctrines of the Reformation: the humility, self-denial, and charity of these two pious and worthy men, are opposed with an unstudied, but not the less striking pointedness, to the cheatery and sensuality which distinguish all the monks and friars represented by Chaucer. So beautiful and so complete is this noble delineation of Christian piety, that we will not venture to injure its effect by quoting it piecemeal in this place, but refer our readers to the volume in which the whole of Chaucer's Prologue will be found at length.

Then we find enumerated a Reve, a Miller, a Sompnour (an officer in the ecclesiastical courts,) a Pardoner, a Manciple, and "myself," that is, Chaucer.

The Miller is a brawny, short, red-headed fellow, strong, boisterous and quarrelsome, flat-nosed, wide-mouthed, debauched; he is dressed in a white coat and blue hood, and armed with sword and buckler.

His conversation and conduct correspond faithfully with such an appearance; he enlivens the journey by his skill in playing on the bagpipe.

The Manciple was an officer attached to the ancient colleges; his duty was to purchase the provisions and other commodities for the consumption of the students; in fact, he was a kind of steward. Chaucer describes this pilgrim as singularly adroit in the exercise of his business, taking good care to advantage himself the while.

Another of the most elaborately painted pictures in Chaucer's gallery is the "Reve," bailiff, or intendant of some great proprietor's estates. He stands before us as a slender, long-legged, choleric individual, with his beard shaven as close as possible, and his hair exceedingly short. He is a severe and

watchful manager of his master's estates, and had grown so rich that he was able to come to his lord's assistance, and "lend him of his owen good." His horse is described, and even named, and he is described as always riding "the hinderest of the route."

Nothing can surpass the nature and truthfulness with which Chaucer has described the Sompnour. His face is fiery red, as cherubim were painted, and so covered with pimples, spots, and discolorations, that neither mercury, sulphur, borax, nor any purifying ointment, could cleanse his complexion. He is a great lover of onions, leeks, and garlic, and fond of "strong win as red as blood;" and when drunk he would speak nothing but Latin, a few terms of which language he had picked up from the writs and citations it was his profession to serve. He is a great taker of bribes, and will allow any man to set at naught the archdeacon's court in the most flagrant manner "for a quart of wine."

The last of the pilgrims is the "Pardonere," or seller of indulgences from Rome. He is drawn to the life, singing, to the bass of his friend the Sompnour, the song of "Come hither, love, to me." The Pardoner's hair is "yellow as wax," smooth and thin, lying on his shoulders: he wears no hood, "for jollité;" that is, in order to appear in the fashion. His eyes (as is often found in persons of this complexion—note Chaucer's truth to nature) are wide and staring like those of a hare; his voice is a harsh treble, like that of a goat; and he has no beard. Chaucer then enumerates the various articles of the Pardoner's professional budget; and certainly there never was collected a list of droller relics: he has Our Lady's veil, a morsel of the sail of St. Paul's ship, a glass full of pigges bones," and a pewter cross crammed with other objects of equal sanctity. With the aid of these and the hypocritical unction of his address, he could manage, in one day, to extract from poor and rustic people more money than the Parson (the regular pastor of the parish) could collect in two months.

The number of the pilgrims now enumerated will be found by any one who takes the trouble to count them to amount to thirty-one, including Chaucer; and the poet describes them setting out on their journey on the following morning. Before their departure, however, the jolly Host of the Tabarde makes a proposition to the assembled company. He offers to go along with them himself, on condition that they constitute him a kind of master of the revels during their journey; showing how agreeably and profitably they could beguile the tedium of the road with the relation of stories. He then proposes that on their return they should all sup together at his hostelry, and that he among them who shall have been adjudged to have told the best story should be entertained at the expense of the whole society. This proposal is unanimously adopted; and nothing can be finer than the mixture of fun and good sense with which honest Harry Bailey, the host, sways the merry sceptre of his temporary sovereignty.

This then is the framework or scaffolding on which Chaucer has erected his Canterbury Tales.

The practice of connecting together a multitude of distinct narrations by some general thread of incident is very natural and extremely ancient. The Orientals, so passionately fond of tale-telling, have universally—and not always very artificially—given consistency and connection to their stories by putting them into the mouth of some single narrator: the various histories which compose the Thousand and One Nights are supposed to be successively recounted by the untiring lips of the inexhaustible Princess Scheherezade; but the source from whence Chaucer more immediately adopted his *framing* was the Decameron of Boccaccio. This work (as it may be necessary to inform our younger readers) consists of a hundred tales divided into decades, each decade occupying one day in the relation. They are narrated by a society of young men and women of rank, who have shut themselves up in a most luxurious and beautiful retreat on the banks of the Arno, in order to escape the infection of the terrible plague then ravaging Florence.

If we compare the plan of Chaucer with that of the Florentine, we shall not hesitate to give the palm of propriety, probability, and good taste to the English poet. A pilgrimage was by no means an expedition of a mournful or solemn kind, and afforded the author the widest field for the selection of character from all classes of society, and an excellent opportunity for the divers humors and oddities of a company fortuitously assembled. It is impossible, too, not to feel that there is something cruel and shocking in the notion of these young, luxurious Italians of Boccaccio whiling away their days in tales of sensual trickery or sentimental distress, while without the well-guarded walls of their retreat thousands of their kinsmen and fellow-citizens were writhing in despairing agony. Moreover, the similarity of rank and age in the personages of Boccaccio produces an insipidity and want of variety: all these careless voluptuaries are repetitions of Dioneo and Fiammetta: and the period of ten days adopted by the Italian has the defect of being purely arbitrary, there being no reason why the narratives might not be continued indefinitely. Chaucer's pilgrimage, on the contrary, is made to Canterbury, and occupies a certain and necessary time; and, on the return of the travelers, the society separates as naturally as it had assembled; after giving the poet the opportunity of introducing two striking and appropriate events—their procession to the shrine of St. Thomas at their arrival in Canterbury, and the prize-supper on their return to London.

Had Chaucer adhered to his original plan, we should have had a tale from each of the party on the journey out, and a second tale from every pilgrim on the way back, making in all sixty-two—or, if the Host also contributed his share, sixty-four. But, alas! the poet has not conducted his pilgrims even to Canterbury; and the tales which he has made them tell only make us the more bitterly lament the non-fulfillment of his original intention.

Before we speak of the narratives themselves, it will be proper to state that our poet continues to

describe the actions, conversation, and deportment of the pilgrims: and nothing can be finer than the remarks put into their mouths respecting the merits of the various tales; or more dramatic than the affected bashfulness of some, when called upon to contribute to the amusement of their companions, and the squabbles and satirical jests made by others.

These passages, in which the tales themselves are, as it were, incrustated, are called Prologues to the various narratives which they respectively precede, and they add inexpressibly to the vivacity and movement of the whole, as in some cases the tales spring, as it were, spontaneously out of the conversations.

Of the tales themselves it will be impossible to attempt even a rapid summary: we may mention, as the most remarkable among the serious and pathetic narratives, the Knight's Tale, the subject of which is the beautiful story of Palamon and Arcite, taken from the Teseide of Boccaccio, but it is unknown whether originally invented by the great Italian, or, as is far more probable, imitated by him from some of the innumerable versions of the "noble story" of Theseus current in the Middle Ages. The poem is full of a strange mixture of manners and periods: the chivalric and the heroic ages appear side by side: but such is the splendor of imagination displayed in this immortal work, so rich is it in magnificence, in pathos, in exquisite delineations of character, and artfully contrived turns of fortune, that the reader voluntarily dismisses all his chronology, and allows himself to be carried away with the fresh and sparkling current of chivalric love and knightly adventure. No reader ever began this poem without finishing it, or ever read it once without returning to it a second time. The effect upon the mind is like that of some gorgeous tissue, gold-inwoven, of tapestry, in an old baronial hall; full of tournaments and battles, imprisoned knights, and emblazoned banners, Gothic temples of Mars and Venus, the lists, the dungeon and the lady's bower, garden and fountain, and moonlit groves. Chaucer's peculiar skill in the delineation of character and appearance by a few rapid and masterly strokes is as perceptible here as in the Prologue to the Tales: the procession of the kings to the tournament is as bright and vivid a piece of painting as ever was produced by the "strong braine" of mediæval Art: and in point of grace and simplicity, what can be finer than the single line descriptive of the beauty of Emelie—so *suggestive*, and therefore so superior to the most elaborate portrait—"Up rose the sun, and up rose Emelie?"

The next poem of a serious character is the Squire's Tale, which indeed so struck the admiration of Milton—himself profoundly penetrated by the spirit of the Romanz poetry—that it is by an allusion to the Squire's Tale that he characterizes Chaucer when enumerating the great men of all ages, and when he places him beside Plato, Shakspeare, Æschylus, and his beloved Euripides: he supposes his Cheerful Man as evoking Chaucer—

And call up him who left half told
The story of Cambuscan bold.

The imagery of the Squire's Tale was certainly well

calculated to strike such a mind as Milton's, so gorgeous, so stately, so heroic, and imbued with all the splendor of Oriental literature; for the scenery and subject of this poem bear evident marks of that Arabian influence which colors so much of the poetry of the Middle Ages, and which probably began to act upon the literature of Western Europe after the Crusades.

In point of deep pathos—pathos carried indeed to an extreme and perhaps hardly natural or justifiable pitch of intensity—we will now cite, among the graver tales of our pilgrims, the story put into the mouth of the Clerke of Oxenforde. This is the story of the Patient Griselda—a model of womanly and wisely obedience, who comes victoriously out of the most cruel and repeated ordeals inflicted upon her conjugal and maternal affections. The beautiful and angelic figure of the Patient Wife in this heart-rending story reminds us of one of those seraphic statues of Virgin Martyrs which stand with clasped hands and uplifted, imploring eye, in the carved niches of a Gothic cathedral—an eternal prayer in sculptured stone—

—Patience on a monument,
Smiling at Grief!

The subject of this tale is, as we mentioned some pages back, invented by Boccaccio, and first seen in 1374, by Petrarch, who was so struck with its beauty that he translated it into Latin, and it is from this translation that Chaucer drew his materials. The English poet indeed appears to have been ignorant of Boccaccio's claim to the authorship, for he makes his "Clerke" say that he had learned it from "Fraunceis Petrarke, the laureat poëte." Petrarch himself bears the strongest testimony to the almost overwhelming pathos of the story, for he relates that he gave it to a Paduan acquaintance of his to read, who fell into a repeated agony of passionate tears. Chaucer's poem is written in the Italian stanza.

Of the comic tales the following will be found the most excellent—The Nun's Priest's Tale, a droll apologue of the Cock and the Fox, in which the very absurdity of some of the accompaniments confers one of the highest qualities which a fable can possess, viz. so high a degree of individuality that the reader forgets that the persons of the little drama are animals, and sympathizes with them as human beings; the Merchant's Tale, which, like the comic stories generally, though very indelicate, is yet replete with the richest and broadest humor; the Reve's Tale, and many shorter stories distributed among the less prominent characters. But the crown and pearl of Chaucer's drollery is the Miller's Tale, in which the delicate and penetrating description of the various actors in the adventure can only be surpassed by the perfectly natural yet outrageously ludicrous catastrophe of the intrigue in which they move.

There is certainly nothing, in the vast treasury of ancient or modern humorous writing, at once so real, so droll, and so exquisitely *enjoué* in the manner of telling. It is true that the subject is not of the most delicate nature; but, though coarse and plain-speaking, Chaucer is never corrupt or vicious: his improprieties are rather the fruit of the ruder age in which

he lived, and the turbid bullitions of a rich and active imagination, than the cool, analyzing, studied profligacy—the more dangerous and corrupting because veiled under a false and morbid sentimentalism—which defiles a great portion of the modern literature of too many civilized countries.

It is worthy of remark that all the tales are in verse with the exception of two, one of which, singularly enough, is given to Chaucer himself. This requires some explanation. When the poet is first called upon for his story, he bursts out into a long, confused, fantastical tale of chivalry, relating the adventures of a certain errant-knight, Sir Thopas, and his wanderings in search of the Queen of Faerie. This is written in the peculiar versification of the *Trouvères* (note, that it is the only tale in which he has adopted this measure,) and is full of all the absurdities of those compositions. When in the full swing of declamation, and when we are expecting to be overwhelmed with page after page of this “sleazy stuff,”—for the poet goes on gallantly, like Don Quixote, “in the style his books of chivalry had taught him, imitating, as near as he can, their very phrase”—he is suddenly interrupted by honest Harry Bailey, the Host, who plays the part of Moderator or Chorus to Chaucer’s pleasant comedy. The Host begs him, with many strong expressions of ridicule and disgust, to give them no more of such “drafty rhyming,” and entreats him to let them hear something less worn-out and tiresome. The poet then proposes to entertain the party with “a litel thing in prose,” and relates the allegorical story of Melibæus and his wife Patience. It is evident that Chaucer, well aware of the immeasurable superiority of the newly-revived classical literature over the barbarous and now exhausted invention of the *Romanz* poets, has chosen this ingenious method of ridiculing the commonplace tales of chivalry; but so exquisitely grave is the irony in this passage, that many critics have taken the “Rime of Sir Thopas” for a serious composition, and have regretted it was left a fragment!

The other prose tale, (we have mentioned Melibæus,) is supposed to be related by the Parson, who is always described as a model of Christian humility, piety, and wisdom; which does not, however, save him from the terrible suspicion of being a *Lollard*, i. e., a heretical and seditious revolutionist.

This composition hardly can be called a “tale,” for it contains neither persons nor events; but it is very curious as a specimen of the sermons of the early Reformers: for a sermon it is, and nothing else—a sermon upon the Seven Deadly Sins, divided and subdivided with all the pedantic regularity of the day. It also gives us a very curious insight into the domestic life, the manners, the costume, and even the cookery of the fourteenth century. Some critics have contended that this sermon was added to the *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer at the instigation of his confessors, as a species of penitence for the light and immoral tone of much of his writings, and particularly as a sort of recantation, or *amende honorable*, for his innumerable attacks on the monks. But this supposition is in direct contradiction with every line

of his admirable portrait of the Parson; and, however natural it may have been for the licentious Boccaccio to have done such public penance for his ridicule of the “Frati,” and his numberless sensual and immoral scenes, his English follower was “made of sterner stuff.” The friend of John of Gaunt, and the disciple of Wickliffe, was not so easily to be worked upon by monastic subtlety as the more superstitious and *sensuous* Italian.

The language of Chaucer is a strong exemplification of the structure of the English language. The ground of his diction will be ever found to be the pure, vigorous, Anglo-Saxon English of the people, *inlaid*—if we may so style it—with an immense quantity of Norman-French words. We may compare this diction to some of those exquisite specimens of *incrusting* left us by the obscure but great artists of the Middle Ages, in which the polish of metal or ivory contrasts so richly with the lustrous ebony.

The difficulty of reading this great poet is very much exaggerated: a very moderate acquaintance with the French and Italian of the fourteenth century, and the observance of a few simple rules of pronunciation, will enable any educated person to read and to enjoy. In particular it is to be remarked that the final letter *e*, occurring in so many English words, had not yet become an *e mute*; and must constantly be pronounced, as well as the termination of the past tense, *ed*, in a separate syllable. The accent also is more varied in its position than is now common in the language. Read with these precautions, Chaucer will be found as harmonious as he is tender, magnificent, humorous, or sublime.

Until the reader is able and willing to appreciate the innumerable beauties of the *Canterbury Tales*, it is not to be expected that he can make acquaintance with the graceful though somewhat pedantic “Court of Love,” an allegorical poem, bearing the strongest marks of its Provençal origin; or with the exquisite delicacy and pure chivalry of the “Flower and the Leaf,” of which latter poem Campbell speaks as follows, enthusiastically but justly:

“The Flower and the Leaf is an exquisite piece of fairy fancy. With a moral that is just sufficient to apologise for a dream, and yet which sits so lightly on the story as not to abridge its most visionary parts, there is, in the whole scenery and objects of the poem, an air of wonder and sweetness, an easy and surprising transition, that is truly magical.”

We cannot conclude this brief and imperfect notice of this great poet without strongly recommending all those who desire to know something of the true character of English literature to lose no time in making acquaintance with the admirable productions of “our Father Chaucer,” as Gascoigne affectionately calls him; the difficulties of his style have been unreasonably exaggerated, and the labor which surmounts them will be abundantly repaid. “It will conduct you,” to use the beautiful words of Milton, “to a hill-side; laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospects and melodious sounds on every side, that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming.”